

A Study on the Chinese Translations of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* from the Perspective of Pragmatic Differences

Qianwen Sun

Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang 330032, Jiangxi, China

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract

This study takes the two Chinese translations of Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as its corpus, and based on Wang Jianguo's (2014) pragmatic translation findings, systematically examines the pragmatic differences between English and Chinese through a comparative analysis. The findings reveal a significant tendency toward "process" in the translation process from English into Chinese—that is, translators generally adopt the N-1 strategy to accommodate Chinese pragmatic conventions. Specifically, at the lexical, syntactic, and aesthetic levels, abstract concepts or result-oriented expressions in English are frequently transformed into more concrete or process-oriented renderings in Chinese.

Keywords

A Thousand Splendid Suns; English-Chinese pragmatic differences; process orientation; comparative analysis

Online publication: July 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American writer, has become a prominent figure in world literature through his profound humanistic concern and distinctive narrative style. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is Hosseini's follow-up masterpiece after *The Kite Runner*. Set against the backdrop of nearly half a century of Afghan history, the novel tells the story of two women growing up and struggling for freedom and dignity amid war and turmoil. Since its release, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* attracted widespread attention in the English-speaking world within just one week, fully demonstrating its international influence and literary value. Meanwhile, the work has

been translated into 56 different languages. In Chinese, there are two distinct translated versions, one translated by Li Jihong and the other by Li Jingyi. This study focuses on these two Chinese translations.

Current research on Khaled Hosseini's novels has largely centered on themes such as feminism^[1], narrative structure^[2], and immigrant identity^[3]. These studies primarily focus on analyzing the thematic content and literary value of the texts. However, translation-focused research on Hosseini's works remains relatively scarce, especially concerning the Chinese translations of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which have received even less scholarly attention. In view of this gap, this study

selects these two translations as its subject to analyze translational phenomena.

2. Differences in English-Chinese Pragmatic Orientation

Fu Lei pointed out in the preface to the revised edition of *Father Goriot*: “Given the differences between the two languages in word classes, sentence structures, grammar and usage, rhetorical conventions, and idioms, one can perceive even deeper differences in modes of thinking, depth of feeling, perspectives, traditional customs, beliefs, social backgrounds, and expressive methods^[4].”

This statement profoundly reveals that the surface-level differences between English and Chinese linguistic systems are essentially rooted in divergent cognitive frameworks. These differences can be traced back to the philosophical traditions of the holistic “unity of man and nature” in Chinese culture and the analytical “subject-object dichotomy” in the English-speaking world, where the former emphasizes dynamic, continuous perception of process, while the latter focuses on static, discrete presentation of results.

Similarly, Levy argues that translation is always a pragmatic act^[5].

From this perspective, Wang Jianguo and He Ziran^[6], in their study of translation cases in *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish*, conducted an in-depth analysis of pragmatic principles in English-Chinese expression. They found that Chinese tends to emphasize process, whereas English places greater emphasis on results. This finding provides a new lens for understanding how speakers of the two languages construct meaning. Wang Jianguo^[7] further notes that process and result are relative concepts: process is more detailed than result, while result is more concise than process. Therefore, meaning related to process typically precedes meaning related to result.

Building on this, if the literal meaning of the source text is taken as the reference point N, then a translation that extends or develops beyond the literal meaning is marked as N+1; conversely, a translation that reduces or explicates the process is marked as N-1. Typically, in the process of translating from English into Chinese—the direction this study focuses on—the tendency is toward N-1, that is, a process-oriented approach.

3. Quantitative Comparative Analysis of the Translations of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

This study takes the two Chinese translations of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as its subject and, based on the theoretical framework of English-Chinese pragmatic orientation differences, adopts a quantitative method to compare their translation strategies. The analysis focuses on Part One and the first three chapters of Part Four of the novel, totaling 1,131 sentences as the corpus sample. Using the categories of “N-1”, “N”, and “N+1”, the distribution of pragmatic orientations in each translation is statistically analyzed.

Table 1. Distribution of “N-1,” “N,” and “N+1” in the Two Translations

	Li Jihong Translation		Li Jingyi Translation	
	Quantity	Percentage	Quantity	Percentage
N-1	250	22.1%	262	23.2%
N	839	74.2%	826	73%
N+1	42	3.7%	43	3.8%
Total	1131	100%	1131	100%

According to **Table 1**, it can be seen that in the translation process, both translators predominantly adopt the “N” strategy, directly conveying the meaning of the original text. However, Wang Jianguo and Xie Fei^[8] argue that even if a Chinese translation appears on the surface to have no obvious transformation from the English original, it cannot simply be considered non-N-1 expression. Taking the sentence “I am a teacher / I am a teacher” as an example, English includes tense markers (present simple), indefinite articles (“a”), and singular/plural markers (absence of “s”), none of which exist in Chinese. Such grammatical differences reflect the discrete nature of English, where linguistic structures have clear boundaries and markers, while Chinese exhibits continuity, with fuzzy boundaries and reliance on context and word order to convey meaning. This difference corresponds to the English pragmatic emphasis on “results” and the Chinese pragmatic emphasis on “process.” Therefore, even if the Chinese translation appears formally similar to the original, its underlying pragmatic features may still reflect

the process-oriented nature of N-1.

Aside from the above-mentioned simple pragmatic conversions, in Li Jihong's translation, 22.1% of the sentences adopt the "N-1" strategy, transforming English result-oriented expressions into Chinese process-oriented ones. In Li Jingyi's translation, this proportion is slightly higher at 23.2%. In addition, both translations contain a very small number of "N+1" cases, with each accounting for less than 4% of the total. The following sections will analyze the specific applications of "N-1" and the "N+1" cases in these two translations.

4. Analysis of "N-1" Cases

4.1. Lexical Level

In translating from Chinese into English, "translators no longer struggle with the original process-oriented expressions, but instead choose a concrete word that bypasses the process and directly captures the result." In contrast, in English-to-Chinese translation, word choice must reflect the process-oriented characteristics of Chinese, supplementing implied processes. Through lexical adjustments, abstract or result-oriented expressions in English are transformed into concrete or process-oriented expressions in Chinese. This transformation involves not only semantic concretization but also adaptation to cultural and cognitive differences. Specifically, it includes the conversion of abstract meanings into concrete meanings and generic terms into specific ones. It can be seen that regardless of the starting point, the outcome is a shift toward concrete meaning.

Example 1:

She cursed their mothers, made hateful faces at them^[9].

他跳上马鞍，一路骑回赫拉特。他把她拥在怀中，用拇指抚摸她若有若无的眉毛，哼催眠曲给她听^[10]。(Li Jihong, trans.)

他跳上馬鞍，立刻趕回赫拉特。他把她擁在懷裏，用拇指輕輕地撫着她細柔的眉毛，哼着搖籃曲^[11]。(Li Jingyi, tans.)

In the original, "bounced her in his arms" and "run his thumb over" are abstract, focusing on physical actions. The Chinese translations render "bounced" as "拥在怀中" or "抱在怀里," conveying not just motion but emotional closeness. "Run" becomes "抚

摸", verbs rich in tactile warmth, better expressing paternal tenderness. "Flaky eyebrows" is transformed from a clinical detail into "若有若无的眉毛" (faint and indistinct), replacing literalness with poetic imagery. This avoids unpleasantness and aligns with Chinese aesthetic preferences for subtlety and beauty. These shifts exemplify semantic concretization—turning abstract, general English terms into vivid, culturally resonant Chinese expressions. By choosing emotionally and sensorially specific words, the translators enhance expressiveness and adapt to Chinese readers' cognitive and aesthetic expectations, achieving a more natural, process-oriented flow.

Example 2:

She would quiver with pride to have a father who knew such things.

她会为有一个知道这些事情的父亲而骄傲得直颤抖。(Li Jihong, trans.)

有位知道這些事情的父親，讓她驕傲的無法自己。(Li Jingyi, tans.)

In Example 2, the original uses an abstract prepositional phrase ("with pride") to describe an emotional state, combined with the verb "quiver" to depict physical action. English condenses emotion and action into a static result through a compound structure (verb + prepositional phrase), reflecting a "result orientation." Li Jihong decomposes "pride" and "quiver" into a causal relationship, using "得" as a complement linker to explicitly show the causal chain of emotion driving action. By using "直颤抖" to concretize the outward manifestation of the abstract emotion (pride), the translation aligns with the temporal logic of Chinese "process orientation." Li Jingyi, on the other hand, downplays the specific action "quiver" and uses "無法自己" (unable to contain herself) to describe a sustained state of emotional loss of control. This conforms to the Chinese expressive habit of "emotion governing action," as seen in idioms like 喜不自胜 (overjoyed) or 怒不可遏 (furious). Both translations transform the English result-oriented expression ("quiver with pride") into process-oriented Chinese descriptions, but through different paths. Li Jihong achieves "explicit physiological process" by adding a complement structure to split cause and effect, while Li Jingyi achieves "explicit emotional process" by psychological description implying dynamism. Both

reflect the “process orientation” characteristic of Chinese translation.

4.2. Syntactic Level

In English, the passive voice is often used to downplay the agent and shift focus onto the patient of the action or the result, reflecting English’s result-oriented tendency. However, in Chinese, the agent of an action often needs to be explicitly stated to highlight the process and agency of the action. Therefore, in translation practice, adjustments to sentence structure enable the target text to conform to Chinese’s preference for dynamic, process-oriented expression. Specifically, this includes the transformation of passive sentences into active ones, and the conversion of given information into new information.

First, regarding the transformation from passive to active sentences. English passive constructions are often converted into active expressions in Chinese by supplementing the logical subject or adjusting voice. For example, the English construction “It is believed that...” is often translated into Chinese as “人们认为...” or “专家认为...”, where a generic subject (“人们”) or specific agent (“专家”) is added to make the implicit agent explicit. This transformation not only aligns with the Chinese subject-predicate-object thinking pattern of “who does what,” but also reinforces the dynamic nature of the action by introducing the agent. Essentially, this is a syntactic reconstruction that transforms the English static, patient-centered result statement into a dynamic, agent-driven process narrative in Chinese.

Example 3:

There, the wheelbarrow had to be emptied and the items hand carried across the water.

到得溪边，他们必须把独轮车上的东西统统卸下，用手搬到溪那边去。(Li Jihong, trans.)

在那裏卸下手推車上的物品，用手提着涉水過溪。(Li Jingyi, tans.)

In Example 3, the original uses the passive voice to downplay the performers (“they”) and focuses on the resulting state of the items—being “emptied” and “carried across”—reflecting English’s result-oriented narrative preference, which defines actions by their outcomes. In the translations, Li Jihong supplements the agent, making explicit the processes of “they unloading the items” and “they carrying the items across the stream,” clearly

identifying the actor and constructing a temporal logic of who did what and how—this conforms to Chinese’s “process-driven” pragmatic habit. Li Jingyi’s translation, while not specifying the agent, supplements the process of achieving the result through a series of detailed actions: “卸下，提着，涉水” (unloading, carrying, wading). Both translations transform the English “items being processed” into “people actively processing items,” reflecting Chinese’s emphasis on “agentivity.”

Second, regarding the conversion from given information to new information: In English-Chinese translation, due to the essential difference between English’s result orientation and Chinese’s process orientation, core results presented as given information (given information) in the source text are often reconstructed as new information (new information) in the target text. This shift in information focus reflects a fundamental opposition in information structure: English tends to foreground key results to highlight logical conclusions, while Chinese habitually places background processes first and the final result last, conforming to the traditional “cause before effect” narrative pattern.

Example 4:

It was this last piece that slipped from Mariam’s fingers, that fell to the wooden floor boards of the kolba and shattered.

从玛丽雅姆手中掉落、在泥屋的木地板上摔得粉碎的，正是最后这件瓷器。(Li Jihong, trans.)

就是那個糖罐，從瑪黎安的手指間滑落，掉在小屋的木頭地板上，摔的粉碎。(Li Jingyi, tans.)

In Example 4, the original uses the definite article (“the”) and the determiner (“last”) to presuppose “the last piece” as given background information, and the previously mentioned porcelain item is the topic of the sentence. Li Jihong’s translation converts the original given information into new information by placing it at the end of the sentence, conforming to Chinese pragmatic habits—that is, an “N-1” expression. The focus shifts from the “shattering” itself to “how it shattered”—emphasizing the dropping and shattering of “the last piece of porcelain,” redirecting the reader’s attention from the result “shattered” to the process “how it shattered.” This aligns with Chinese’s emphasis on process. In contrast, Li Jingyi’s translation still adopts an “N” expression, i.e., a literal translation, which to some extent diminishes the

emotional effect.

4.3. Aesthetic Level

Aesthetic-level translation is built upon lexical and syntactic adjustments and is realized through transformations at these levels. In other words, the aesthetic characteristics of a translation are embedded within observable linguistic units such as words and sentences, and run through the entire translation process.

“English exhibits strong boundaries between linguistic forms, whereas Chinese has weaker boundaries between its linguistic forms^[12].” In English, word classes, syntactic structures, and logical relationships are typically marked by explicit signals—such as prepositions, conjunctions, and relative pronouns—that clearly define the function and role of each linguistic component. By contrast, Chinese tends toward a more natural, fluid, and boundary-ambiguous mode of expression, with fewer grammatical markers and greater reliance on context and word order to convey meaning. Therefore, in English-to-Chinese translation, it is often necessary to delete such markers or to explicitly or implicitly render the grammatical meanings they imply.

Example 5:

Up the dirt track, over rocks and pebbles, around holes and bushes, the boys took turns pushing until they reached the stream.

沿着这条上山的土路，男孩们轮流推着车，碾过岩石和卵石，避开坑洼和灌木丛，来到那条山溪。(Li Jihong, trans.)

兩兄弟輪流推車，走上泥巴路，越過石塊和鵝卵石，避開坑洞與樹枝，一直來到溪邊。(Li Jingyi, trans.)

In Example 5 the original contains prepositions such as *up*, *over*, *around*, and *until* that explicitly mark direction and motion, reflecting English’s strong structural boundaries. In contrast, Chinese linguistic forms have weaker boundaries and rely more on context and situational cues to convey meaning. In Chinese, complete meaning can often be expressed without explicit grammatical markers. Li Jihong’s translation renders the bounded prepositions of English into a series of verbs: “沿着” (along), “碾过” (roll over), “避开” (avoid), successfully transforming the clearly defined directions and actions in English into a natural and fluent narrative in Chinese. Li Jingyi’s translation similarly removes the

prepositional boundaries from the original, using verb phrases such as “走上” (walk up), “越過” (cross over), “避開” (avoid) to describe the sequence of actions. Both translators’ renderings are classified as N-1.

5. Analysis of “N+1” Reverse Cases

Given the significant pragmatic differences between Chinese and English, translators typically perform pragmatic shifts to ensure that the target text conforms to the pragmatic norms of the target language. Nevertheless, there are still some special cases in translation practice where the translator does not strictly follow established pragmatic conversion rules. These examples are nonetheless worth attention.

Example 6:

Jalil told her the story of Queen Gauhar Shad, who had raised the famous minarets as her loving ode to Herat back in the fifteenth century.

他说 15 世纪的时候，她建造了许多著名的尖塔，当做是献给赫拉特的颂诗。(Li Jihong, trans.)

English is a language with strong structural boundaries; hence it frequently employs prepositions and conjunctions—such as “*as*” in Example 6—which serve as explicit boundary markers. Li Jihong retains this marker by translating it as “当做” (to regard as), which, although semantically faithful to the original, fails to fully adapt to the pragmatic norms and aesthetic preferences of Chinese expression. By contrast, referring to Li Jingyi’s translation, this could be rendered as “...ge song ta dui Helat de zhong ai” (“...sing of her love for Herat”), omitting the boundary marker and converting the noun “ode” into the verb “ge song” (sing). This transformation not only reflects Chinese’s preference for dynamic expressions but also demonstrates the characteristic of weaker linguistic boundaries in Chinese sentences.

Example 7:

She cursed their mothers, made hateful faces at them.

她辱骂他们的母亲，对他们黑口黑面。(Li Jihong, trans.)

In Example 7, the original English presents a static, result-oriented image. The translation “黑口黑面” (black face and harsh expression) describes a sullen expression and hostile attitude—it is a result-oriented description, still representing a static portrayal rather

than a dynamic depiction of an action process. Therefore, to better highlight the dynamic aesthetic preference of Chinese, it could instead be translated as “... 对他们横眉怒目” (glare fiercely at them) or “... 冲他们呲牙咧嘴 怒目而视” (bared teeth and glared furiously at them). Such expressions, as mentioned above, exemplify the principle of “emotion governing action”.

Example 8:

To stand up to his family, to his wives and in-laws, and accept responsibility for what he had done. Instead, behind closed doors, a face saving deal had quickly been struck.

不敢挺身對抗他的家族，對抗他的妻子和姻親，爲自己所做的是負起責任。相反地，他關起門來，馬上搞定了顧及顏面的條件。(Li Jingyi, tans.)

In Example 8, the original phrase “face saving” functions as an attributive modifier of “deal.” Li Jingyi translates it literally as “顧及顏面的條件” (a condition that takes face into account), preserving the nominalized structure of the source text. However, this rendering fails to fully convey its dynamic meaning and causal relationship. The translation should consider transforming the “result meaning” into “cause meaning” or “conditional meaning.” By referring to Li Jihong’s approach: “..... 为了挽回面子，匆匆和家人达成了一项交易” (“...in

order to save face, he quickly reached an agreement with his family.”), the nominalized result is deconstructed into a purpose-action chain in Chinese. This not only restores the causal logic implied in the original but also enhances the narrative fluency of the translation, exemplifying the shift from static result-orientation in English to dynamic process-orientation in Chinese. Thus, such a rendering clearly better aligns with the process-oriented pragmatic habits of Chinese.

6. Conclusion

At the pragmatic level, the differences between English and Chinese are rooted in the deep divergence of Chinese and Western thinking patterns and cognitive structures. The logical-analytical tradition of English has given rise to result-oriented expression, while the holistic thinking of Chinese culture has fostered a process-centered narrative. This difference profoundly affects the pragmatic habits of native speakers, thereby leaving traces of pragmatic variation in translated works. This paper, through an analysis of two Chinese translations of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, adopts the “N-1” to make the translation better conform to Chinese expressive habits. In contrast, it is found that “N+1” renderings often appear inappropriate

in the target text, affecting readability.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Imran M, Smail S M, 2022, Khaled Hosseini’s women as modern archetypes: A study of obedient, resistant and empowered Afghan women. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 7: 1041435.
- [2] Wang Q, 2021, On the narrative structure and style in Hosseini’s novels: A case study of *And the Mountains Echoed*. *Journal of Heilongjiang Institute of Technology (Comprehensive Edition)*, 21(9): 138–142.
- [3] Guo F, Zhang D, 2023, Hosseini’s anxiety and identity choice: A study of the cultural stance in *The Kite Runner*. *Journal of Changchun Normal University*, 42(9): 127–131.
- [4] Fu L, 1984, Preface to the retranslated edition of Eugénie Grandet. In L. Luo (Ed.), *Collected essays on translation* (pp. 33–38). The Commercial Press.
- [5] Levý J, 2000, Translation as a decision process. In L. Venuti (Ed.), *The translation studies reader* (pp. 148–159). Routledge.
- [6] Wang J, He Z, 2014, Emphasizing process or result? The influence of translators’ native language on English-to-Chinese

translation. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, 2: 7–12.

- [7] Wang J, 2019, *Foundations of Chinese-English translation: Theory and practice*. China Translation Publishing House.
- [8] Wang J, Xie F, 2020, On the impact of pragmatic differences between Chinese and English on translation: A comparative analysis of four translations of *Border Town*. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 41(3): 100–109+189.
- [9] Hosseini K, 2007, *A thousand splendid suns*. Penguin Group.
- [10] Hosseini K, 2007, *A thousand splendid suns*. Shanghai People's Publishing House. (Translated by J. Li Jihong)
- [11] Hosseini K, 2007, *A thousand splendid suns*. Muma Culture. (Translated by J. Li Jingyi)
- [12] Wang J, 2020, *Foundations of English-Chinese translation: Theory and practice*. China Translation Publishing House.

Publisher's note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.